

## MISHNEH TORAH

### THE LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR

#### CHAPTER X

1. It is our duty to be more careful in the performance of the commandment of *tzedakah* than in that of any other positive commandment, for *tzedakah* is the mark of the righteous man who is of the seed of our father Abraham, as it is said, *For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children, etc., to do righteousness* (Gen. 18:19). The throne of Israel cannot be established, nor true faith made to stand up, except through *tzedakah*, as it is said, *In righteousness shalt thou be established* (Isa. 54:14); nor will Israel be redeemed, except through the practice of *tzedakah*, as it is said, *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness* (Isa. 1:27).

2. No man is ever impoverished by *tzedakah*, nor does evil or harm befall anyone by reason of it, as it is said, *And the work of righteousness shall be peace* (Isa. 32:17). He who has compassion upon others, others will have compassion upon him, as it is said, *That the L-rd may . . . show thee mercy, and, have compassion upon thee* (Deut. 13:18). Whosoever is cruel and merciless lays himself open to suspicion as to his descent, for cruelty is found only among the heathens, as it is said, *They are cruel, and have no compassion* (Jer. 50:42). All Israelites and those that have attached themselves to them are to each other like brothers, as it is said, *Ye are the children of the L-rd your G-d* (Deut. 14:1). If brother will show no compassion to brother, who will? And unto whom shall the poor of Israel raise their eyes? Unto the heathens, who hate them and persecute them? Their eyes are therefore hanging solely upon their brethren.

3. He who turns his eyes away from *tzedakah* is called a base fellow, just as is he who worships idols. Concerning the worship of idols Scripture says, *Certain base fellows are gone out* (Deut. 13:14), and concerning him who turns his eyes away from *tzedakah* it says, *Beware that there be not a base thought in thy heart* (Deut. 15:9). Such a man is also called wicked, as it is said, *The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel* (Prov. 12:10). He is also called a sinner, as it is said, *And he cries unto the L-rd against thee, and it be sin in thee* (Deut. 15:10). The Holy One, blessed He, stands nigh unto the cry of the poor, as it is said, *Thou hearest the cry of the poor*. One should therefore be careful about their cry, for a covenant has been made with them, as it is said, *And it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto Me, that I will hear, for I am gracious* (Exod. 22:26).

4. He who gives *tzedakah* to a poor man with a hostile countenance and with his face averted to the ground, loses his merit and forfeits it, even if he gives as much as a thousand gold coins. He should rather give with a friendly countenance and joyfully. He should commiserate with the recipient in his distress, as it is said, *If I have not wept for him that was in trouble, and if my soul grieved not for the needy?* (Job 30:25). He should also speak to him prayerful and comforting words, as it is said, *And I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy* (Job 29:13).

5. If a poor man asks you for *tzedakah* and you have nothing to give him, comfort him with words. It is forbidden to rebuke a poor man or to raise one's voice in a shout at him, seeing that his heart is broken and crushed, and Scripture says, *A broken and contrite heart, O G-d, Thou wilt not despise* (Ps. 51:19), and again, *To revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones* (Isa. 57:15). Woe unto him who shames the poor! Woe unto him! One should rather be unto the poor as a father, with both compassion and words, as it is said, *I was a father to the needy* (Job 29:16).

6. He who presses others to give *tzedakah* and moves them to act thus, his reward is greater than the reward of him who gives *tzedakah* himself, as it is said, *And the work of righteousness shall be peace* (Isa.32:17). Concerning *tzedakah* collectors and their like Scripture says, *And they that turn the many to righteousness (shall shine) as the stars* (Dan. 12:3).

7. **There are eight degrees of *tzedakah*, each one superior to the other.** The highest degree, than which there is none higher, is one who upholds the hand of an Israelite reduced to poverty by handing him a gift or a loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding work for him, in order to strengthen his hand, so that he would have no need to beg from other people. Concerning such a one Scripture says, *Thou shalt uphold him; as a stranger and a settler shall he live with thee* (Lev. 25:35), meaning uphold him, so that he would not lapse into want.

8. Below this is he who gives *tzedakah* to the poor in such a way that he does not know to whom he has given, nor does the poor man know from whom he has received. This constitutes the fulfilling of a religious duty for its own sake, and for such there was a Chamber of Secrets in the Temple, whereunto the righteous would contribute secretly, and where from the poor of good families would draw their sustenance in equal secrecy. Close to such a person is he who contributes directly to the *tzedakah* fund. One should not, however, contribute directly to the *tzedakah* fund unless he knows that the person in charge of it is trustworthy, is a Sage, and knows how to manage it properly, as was the case of Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion.

9. Below this is he who knows to whom he is giving, while the poor man does not know from whom he is receiving. He is thus like the great among the Sages who were wont to set out secretly and throw the money down at the doors of the poor. This is a proper way of doing it, and a preferable one if those in charge of *tzedakah* are not conducting themselves as they should.

10. Below this is the case where the poor man knows from whom he is receiving, but himself remains unknown to the giver. He is thus like the great among the Sages who used to place the money in the fold of a linen sheet which they would throw over their shoulder, whereupon the poor would come behind them and take the money without being exposed to humiliation.

11. Below this is he who hands the *tzedakah* to the poor man before being asked for them.

12. Below this is he who hands the *tzedakah* to the poor man after the latter has asked for them.

13. Below this is he who gives the poor man less than what is proper, but with a friendly countenance.

14. Below this is he who gives *tzedakah* with a frowning countenance.

15. The great among the Sages used to hand a *perutah* to a poor man before praying, and then proceeded to pray, as it is said, *As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness* (Ps. 17:15)

16. He who provides maintenance for his grown sons and daughters—whom he is not obligated to maintain—in order that the sons might study Torah, and that the daughters might learn to follow the right path and not expose themselves to contempt, and likewise he who provides maintenance for his father and mother, is accounted as performing an act of *tzedakah*. Indeed it is an outstanding act of *tzedakah*, since one's relative has precedence over other people. Whosoever serves food and

drink to poor men and orphans at his table, will, when he calls to G-d, receive an answer and find delight in it, as it is said, *Then shalt thou call, and the L-rd will answer* (Isa. 58:9).

17. The Sages have commanded that one should have poor men and orphans as members of his household rather than bondsmen, for it is better for him to employ the former, so that children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob might benefit from his possessions rather than children of Ham, seeing that he who multiplies bondsmen multiplies sin and iniquity every day in the world, whereas if poor people are members of his household, he adds to merits and fulfillment of commandments every hour.

18. One should always restrain himself and submit to privation rather than be dependent upon other people or cast himself upon public charity, for thus have the Sages commanded us, saying, "Make the Sabbath a weekday rather than be dependent upon other people." Even if one is a Sage held in honor, once he becomes impoverished, he should engage in a trade, be it even a loathsome trade, rather than be dependent upon other people. It is better to strip hides off animal carcasses than to say to other people, "I am a great Sage, I am a priest, provide me therefore with maintenance." So did the Sages command us. Among the great Sages there were hewers of wood, carriers of beams, drawers of water to irrigate gardens, and workers in iron and charcoal. They did not ask for public assistance, nor did they accept it when offered to them.

19. Whosoever is in no need of *tzedakah* but deceives the public and does accept them, will not die of old age until he indeed becomes dependent upon other people. He is included among those of whom Scripture says, *Cursed is the man that trusteth in man* (Jer. 17:5). On the other hand, whosoever is in need of *tzedakah* and cannot survive unless he accepts them, such as a person who is of advanced age, or ill, or afflicted with sore trials, but is too proud and refuses to accept them, is the same as a shedder of blood and is held to account for his own soul, and by his suffering he gains nothing but sin and guilt. Whosoever is in need of *tzedakah* but denies himself, postpones the hour, and lives a life of want in order not to be a burden upon the public, will not die of old age until he shall have provided maintenance for others out of his own wealth. Of him and of those like him it is said, *Blessed is the man that trusteth in the L-rd* (Jer. 17:7).